Rosa Parks, civil rights icon, dead at 92
With act of dignity, a movement began

By Mark Feeney, Globe Staff | October 25, 2005

Rosa Parks, the Alabama seamstress whose soft-spoken refusal to give up her bus seat to a white man triggered the Montgomery bus boycott, the first great mass action in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, died yesterday. She was 92.

Mrs. Parks died at her home in Detroit of natural causes, according to a spokesman for US Representative John Conyers, Democrat of Michigan.

The boycott brought to national prominence a 26-year-old Baptist minister named Martin Luther King Jr. He later inscribed a copy of his book "Stride Toward Freedom" to Mrs. Parks, "Whose creative witness," he wrote, "was the great force that led to the modern stride toward freedom."

That act of "creative witness" made Mrs. Parks a world icon of freedom and earned her the popular title "mother of the civil rights movement."

"I had no idea when I refused to give up my seat on that Montgomery bus that my small action would help put an end to the segregation laws in the South," she wrote in her autobiography, "Rosa Parks: My Story" (1992). "People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that wasn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was 42. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick said last night he felt a personal tie to Mrs. Parks: "She stood up by sitting down. I'm only standing here because of her."

US Representative Charles Rangel, a New York Democrat, lauded Mrs. Parks's mettle.

"I truly believe that there's a little bit of Rosa Parks in all Americans who have the courage to say enough is enough and stand up for what they believe in," Rangel said.

Whites made up less than a third of the ridership of the Montgomery public transit system in 1955, and blacks had long regarded bus segregation as one of the most onerous local aspects of Jim Crow. City buses had 36 seats. Under Alabama law, the first 10 were reserved for whites. The last 10 were customarily reserved for blacks. The middle 16 were a kind of racial no man's land, where seating was at the driver's discretion. Black passengers had to give up their seats to white passengers. In addition, drivers (all of whom were white) could make black passengers, once they had paid their fare at the front, exit the bus and reenter through the door at the back of the bus.

The Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had for some months been eager to file suit over the segregation of city buses. Two cases had been seriously considered only to be rejected when the prospective plaintiffs were deemed unsuitable.

Then on Dec. 1, 1955, it found itself with a dream plaintiff, its own secretary, Mrs. Parks.

The irony was that if she hadn't been somewhat distracted that Thursday evening, Mrs. Parks wouldn't have gotten on that particular bus. In 1943, she had run afoul of bus segregation by refusing to reenter a bus through its rear door after having paid her fare. The driver, J. P. Blake, had ejected her from the vehicle. Mrs. Parks found the experience so humiliating she had ever since avoided any bus Blake was driving.

After getting off from her job at the Montgomery Fair department store, where she worked as a $25-a-week assistant tailor, Mrs. Parks went to catch a bus home. She was so preoccupied with planning for an NAACP workshop to be held that weekend that it wasn't until after she had paid her fare that she noticed who the driver was.

Mrs. Parks sat in an empty seat at the front of the middle section. At the next stop, several whites got on, filling up the white section, with one man left standing. Blake ordered the four blacks in the front row of the middle section to stand up so the man could sit. The three other passengers in that row complied. She did not.

Blake asked whether Mrs. Parks was going to stand.

"No," she said.

"Well, I'm going to have to have you arrested," he told her.

"You may do that," she replied.

Those were the only words to pass between them. As Taylor Branch wrote in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book about the civil rights movement, "Parting the Waters," "She spoke so softly that Blake would not have been able to hear her above the drone of normal bus noise."

E. D. Nixon, president of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP, went to the police station along with Clifford and Virginia Durr, two leading white members of the local civil rights community. (As it happened, Mrs. Parks had done seamstress work for Mrs. Durr.)

Nixon and the Durrs secured Mrs. Parks's release -- the trial was set for the following Monday -- and brought her home. It was there that Nixon proposed to Mrs. Parks that she allow herself to become the test case of bus segregation. As he later said, "I knew she'd stand on her feet. She was honest,

she was clean, she had integrity. The press couldn't go out and dig up something she did last year, or last month, or five years ago. They couldn't hang nothing like that on Rosa Parks."

Raymond Parks, who would suffer a nervous breakdown during the boycott, argued against his wife's accepting. "The white folks will kill you, Rosa," he told her.

Even so, she said yes. "If you think it will mean something to Montgomery and do some good, I'll be happy to go along with it," she said. With those simple words, the modern civil rights movement began.

That night, the Women's Political Council, another local civil rights group, drafted a letter of protest. "Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown into jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus and give it to a white person," the letter began. "We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses on Monday in protest of the arrest and trial."

When the buses rolled on Monday, almost no blacks were on them. Thrilled by their success, local black leaders formed the Montgomery Improvement Association to oversee the boycott. Chosen to lead the group was the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, King. Relatively new in town, he had yet to make any enemies or become part of any of the various rival groups in the black community. It was this reason, more than any other, that determined his selection. That night he remarked to a friend as they drove to a rally, "This could turn into something big."

The association had three demands: courteous treatment on the buses; first-come, first-served seating, with whites in front and blacks in back; and the hiring of black drivers for black bus routes. Eventually, the organization developed its own transit system of 20 private cars and 14 church-owned station wagons. Some 30,000 people used it daily.

Mrs. Parks, who had been convicted on Dec. 5 of violating the segregation laws, had received a suspended sentence and been fined $10, plus $4 in court costs. A month later she lost her job. "This was a blessing in a way," she later wrote, "because then I didn't have to worry about how I was going to get to and from work without riding the buses."

The association filed suit in federal court on Feb. 1, 1956, challenging the constitutionality of segregated seating. On June 5, a three-judge panel voted 2-to-1 in the plaintiffs' favor. On Nov. 13, the Supreme Court upheld the lower court ruling. The boycott continued until Dec. 20, when federal marshals served the order on city officials. The boycott had lasted for 381 days. "It didn't feel like a victory actually," Mrs. Parks wrote. "There still had to be a great deal to do."

Rosa Louise Parks was born in Tuskegee, Ala., on Feb. 4, 1913, the oldest child of James McCauley, a carpenter, and Leona (Edwards), a schoolteacher. When Mrs. Parks was 2 1/2, her parents separated.

"I had a very strong sense of what was fair," she wrote of herself as a girl, something she attributed to the teachings of her mother and maternal grandparents. To care for her maternal grandmother and, later, her mother, Mrs. Parks dropped out of high school early in her junior year.

In 1932, she married Raymond Parks, a barber 10 years her senior who was active in civil rights causes. She later recalled that Parks "was the first man of our race, aside from my grandfather, with whom I actually discussed anything about the racial conditions."

With her husband's encouragement, Mrs. Parks went back to school and became one of the few blacks in Montgomery to have a high school diploma. She worked at a local hospital and, during World War II, at an Army Air Force base.

During the 1940s, Mrs. Parks and her husband were members of a nascent voting-rights group called the Voters' League. She kept a list of all black voters in Montgomery. "There were 31 people on the registered list," she said, adding with uncharacteristic tartness, "and some of them were in the cemetery."

In December 1943, Mrs. Parks joined the NAACP. "I was the only woman there, and they needed a secretary, and I was too timid to say no." She served in that position until 1957. Mrs. Parks was also active in several local religious and civic groups.

After the boycott, Mrs. Parks, her husband, and mother, moved to Detroit at the behest of her younger brother, Sylvester. He had lived there since the end of World War II and was fearful for the safety of his sister, who had been harassed in public and received countless threatening phone calls.

Mrs. Parks remained active in the civil rights movement, giving speeches and participating in marches and protests. She eventually took a job running Conyer's Detroit office, a position she held from 1965 until retiring in 1988.

In later years, she divided her time between Detroit and Los Angeles.

In her later years, Mrs. Parks faced several difficulties.

In 1994, her bungalow was broken into, and a burglar struck her in the face and chest before fleeing with $53.

Physically frail, she received a pacemaker in 1988 and suffered a stroke in 2003.

Mrs. Parks lost a 1999 lawsuit that sought to prevent the hip-hop duo OutKast from using her name as the title of a Grammy-nominated song, which carried the refrain "Ah ha, hush that fuss/Everybody moves to the back of the bus."

Mrs. Parks, however, eventually saw her place in US history universally acknowledged. In 1965, Cleveland Avenue in Montgomery was renamed Rosa Parks Boulevard (she was arrested on a Cleveland Avenue line bus.) In 1996, Boston dedicated a city park to her on Walnut Avenue in Roxbury.

In 1996, she was awarded the nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Mrs. Parks's husband died in 1977.

Material from the Associated Press was used in this obituary.